

Beginner's Guide To Stoic Virtues: Unclutter Your Mind/Life

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- [Dr. Sandip Roy](#).

Any philosopher worth their salt has these two basic questions to understand and answer:

- What is the highest good in life?
- What should we ideally aim for in this life?

The Stoic philosophers felt and held the answer to both is **Virtue** and its four cardinal sub-virtues — wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage.

At some point, we wonder if we lived a life that we'd be proud to live again without changing much.

The hack to that kind of life lies in [the timeless wisdom of Stoicism](#).

Mastering this ancient, *yet modern*, philosophy is like discovering a life hack for happiness and fulfillment.

At the heart of Stoic philosophy are the four cardinal virtues—principles that, once embraced, render all else secondary on the journey to a contented life.

So, what are these four Stoic virtues that can transform your existence into one of pride and purpose?

What Are The 4 Cardinal Stoic Virtues?

The four Stoic cardinal virtues are Wisdom, Justice, Temperance, and Courage. They were designed as an essential ethical system that helped people navigate challenging times. The four virtues of Stoicism have their origins in the teachings of Socrates and Plato.

1. **Wisdom** or *Phronêsis* – This is the virtue of knowing what is good, what is bad, and what is neither. It's the practical wisdom that guides toward excellent actions, preventing future harm.
2. **Justice** or *Dikaïosynê* – It includes practicing righteousness, kindness, and equitable fairness. Justice in Stoicism is about acting in a way that is morally right and beneficial to society.
3. **Temperance** or *Sôphrosynê* – Temperance or moderation is having self-discipline, self-awareness, and maintaining social decorum. It's about finding balance and moderation in all aspects of life.
4. **Courage** or *Andreia* – Courage is about being brave and showing resilience in facing fears and challenges. It's the moral and mental strength to handle difficulties without sacrificing one's values.

Together, these four virtues—wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage—form the essence of *Aretê* or *Virtue*, the hallmark of a good and flourishing human life.

[Cicero](#), Cicero, one of the most renowned orators of ancient Rome, explains the four cardinal virtues thus:

Virtue is a habit of the mind, consistent with nature, and moderation, and reason. ... It has then four divisions — prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Prudence is the knowledge of things which are good, or bad, or neither good nor bad. ... Justice is a habit of the mind which attributes its proper dignity to everything, preserving a due regard to the general welfare. ... Fortitude [i.e., courage] is a deliberate encountering of danger and enduring of labour. ... [And] temperance is the form and well-regulated dominion of reason over lust and other improper affections of the mind.

— Cicero, De Inventione (II.53-54)

1. Wisdom Or *Phronêsis*: The Compass Of A Happy Life

Being wise means being able to make fair choices.

Phronêsis is **wisdom** or **prudence** – the practical ability to analyze and navigate the complexities of life, separating the good from the bad and the neutral ([indifferent to human life](#)).

In the 3rd century book [Lives of the Eminent Philosophers](#), Diogenes Laërtius says that wisdom is the “*knowledge of what should and should not be done, or knowledge of what is good or bad or neither.*”

Wisdom is an internal compass that directs your decisions and actions towards *eudaimonia*, or [human flourishing](#). This inner guide helps you filter out the substandard from the high-standard, and make choices that would eventually prove excellent.

“A venerable tradition in philosophy, associated primarily with Aristotle and Plato, maintains that having knowledge is virtuous, while ignorance is a vice. Accordingly, no trait can be a virtue if having that trait requires being ignorant of certain facts.”

– [David Shatz](#), Professor of Philosophy, Ethics, and Religious Thought, Yeshiva University

This is how wisdom helps us achieve personal peace, joy, and happy life away from suffering:

- Most of our challenges often stem from misguided beliefs rather than our circumstances. Wisdom empowers us to reassess those beliefs, accept the past, and forge a renewed self.
- It enables us to distinguish between dubious choices and virtuous ones, between justice and injustice, and to differentiate genuine pride from hubris, thus allowing us to [stop overthinking](#).
- Wisdom also helps us stay calm during arguments and disagreements.

Seneca said, *"Without wisdom the mind is sick, and the body itself, however physically powerful, can only have the kind of strength that is found in a person in a demented or delirious state."*

Massimo Pigliucci, Professor of Philosophy and author of [The Stoic Guide to a Happy Life: 53 Brief Lessons for Living](#) says:

"The reason why virtue/wisdom is the only good thing because, by definition, it cannot be used to do bad. A wise person is the one that takes the right course of action, not just instrumentally, but morally. A wise villain, by contrast, is an oxymoron."

Wisdom in Stoicism means being careful and thoughtful, making good decisions, thinking quickly, being practical, having a clear idea of what you want to do, and being resourceful.

Can you, or I, live without getting criticism or negative comments? No. Even when we're doing everything right, there will be faultfinders.

This how we can use the power of wisdom to handle criticism and negative people:

- If we see there's truth in the criticism, we acknowledge it and adapt accordingly.
- If there's no truth, we ignore their words and confidently stay on our course.
- Wisdom helps us focus on the message without judging the messenger.

Wisdom stands as a complete virtue in its own right. Some feel that wisdom overlaps with Virtue or *Aretê*, but Stoic masters keep the four cardinal virtues separate.

And you should commit to memory what the [Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius](#) told himself daily about the challenge of justice:

"When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: the people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous and surly. They are like this because they can't tell good from evil."

2. Justice Or *Dikaiosynê*: Doing The Right Thing At All Times

Also called the virtue of **morality**, **justice** means doing what is right and fair, and doing it at all times, more so in times of weakness and adversity.

A Stoic believed that justice was their *duty* to society, and that they should be good- hearted, fair, and honest.

Our sense of justice watches from behind how we act and how we decide when it comes to others in our community. This sense should be steady, equitable, and unselfish.

"If it's not right, do not do it. If it is not true, do not say it."

– Marcus Aurelius

Justice includes piety, good-heartedness, public spiritedness, honesty, equity, and fair dealing.

From a Stoic's standpoint, a just person guides their decisions based on what is fair and gives others their proper dues, even when under threat or in turbulent times. They quickly choose what would serve the society best.

For the unjust people, the idea of justice shifts from case to case, as they try to balance each situation with how much it is good to them against how much it is unfair that others will tolerate.

"That which is not good for the bee-hive cannot be good for the bees."

– Marcus Aurelius

People *without* a sense of moral justice live in mental chaos and moral morass. When faced with a moral dilemma, they have to brainstorm every time to pick an option.

The just people, on the other hand, are not [mentally drained and lost on](#)

[willpower](#). They don't overanalyze their options, so they can effortlessly make the right call every time.

Justice is like having a sense of fair play inside your heart. It is following the rules of fairness and equity, making sure everyone gets a fair shot.

Justice means giving everyone what they deserve, whether in a game or in life. It's choosing to do the fair thing because it feels right.

It is the virtue that involves *distribution*: distributing to each person according to what they deserve.

Musonius Rufus, a Roman Stoic philosopher of the 1st century AD, best known for being the teacher of Epictetus, said of this:

"To honor equality, to want to do good, and for a person, being human, to not want to harm human beings—this is the most honorable lesson and it makes just people out of those who learn it."

Marcus Aurelius held **Justice** as the highest importance of the four Stoic virtues as he reigned over the vast Roman Empire for two decades. He is universally acknowledged as the most **just** of all emperors of Rome before and after him.

"Your death will be soon on you: and you are not yet... convinced that justice of action is the only wisdom."

– Marcus Aurelius, [Mediations](#) (4.37)

3. Temperance Or *Sôphrosynê*: The Balance Of Desires And Needs

Sôphrosynê, also called **moderation** or **temperance**, is the Stoic virtue that includes self-restraint, self-discipline, and the mastery of one's willpower. It's about engaging only in what is necessary and necessary and essential, not more.

Temperance includes organization, orderliness, modesty, self-control, good discipline, and seemliness.

- This virtue teaches us not to be swayed by extreme emotions—whether it's excessive joy or sorrow, love or disdain, or praises or

grudges.

- Temperance champions the pursuit of long-term well-being over fleeting gratification, and aligns with the [Epicurean way of a life of simple pleasures](#).
- It's the balanced state that prevents us from overeating, overthinking, or overindulging in life's temptations.
- Temperance involves thoughtful *acquisition*, urging us to consider carefully what we should acquire before deciding to acquire it.

Temperance, at the right time and to the right degree, can give us abundance and fulfillment. Let's turn to the wisdom of Stoic philosophers to shed light on this virtue.

Marcus Aurelius, who was insistent on having temperance and wrote what sets humans apart from animals is their ability to control their impulses, says,

"Most of what we say and do is unnecessary: remove the superfluity, and you will have more time and less bother. So in every case one should prompt oneself: 'Is this, or is it not, something necessary?' And the removal of the unnecessary should apply not only to actions but to thoughts also: then no redundant actions either will follow."

– Marcus Aurelius, Meditations 4.24

And **Seneca** sagely advised in his Letters From A Stoic,

"You ask what is the proper limit to a person's wealth? First, having what is essential, and second, having what is enough."

"People who know no self-restraint lead stormy and disordered lives, passing their time in a state of fear commensurate with the injuries they do to others, never able to relax."

Donald Robertson, a cognitive-behaviorist and a leading Stoic thinker who authored the excellent [How to Think Like a Roman Emperor](#), says,

"Stoics employed it to rise above their fears and desires and achieve

apatheia or freedom from unhealthy passions and attachment to external things."

Temperance or moderation guides us in making wise decisions ("smart choices") about our desires and pleasures, without excess. It's like having a personal moderator who lets us savor life's delights, but never allows irresponsible overindulgence.

A Stoic exercises moderation in all aspects of life, be it wealth, power, hunger, or any form of indulgence. Today, there's another: [social media scrolling](#) *until the cows come home.*

Temperance can help us moderate this information overload and dopamine addiction by handling our digital engagements with mindfulness and restraint.

"What needs to be taken care of is not let need become greed. Because needs can always be met, but greed can never be fulfilled."

– Rajnikanth, Indian actor

4. Courage Or *Andreia*: Being Brave And Staying Strong Inside

Also called **fortitude**, the virtue of **courage** is the state of standing strong and thinking correctly in dangerous and fearful situations.

Courage is *not* the elimination of fear, desire, or anxiety. Rather, it is deciding and acting despite your fear, passion, and anxiety.

So, being courageous is facing our fears and doing the right things even when shivering in fear.

Courage is subdivided into endurance, confidence, great-heartedness, stout-heartedness, high-mindedness, cheerfulness, and industriousness (love of work).

- Courage is like having an inner shield that keeps you battle-ready, no matter how tough things get. It's the confidence a soldier feels in war,

knowing what to do and how to stay calm.

- Courage means you don't let fear make your decisions for you; instead, you listen to your inner wisdom. It's about being brave, even when you might be facing something as scary as death.
- Courage guards your mind and protects your thoughts in tough situations. Its strength helps face danger without backing down, sticking to what you know is right.
- Courage is keeping your cool and holding on to your brave thoughts, even when things get as intense as they do in a battle, and it's about sticking to the rules of being brave.

The Stoics warned us that courage without other virtues—like, justice and wisdom

—stops being a virtue; instead, it becomes a vice. So, one cannot be courageous without being also “good and straightforward, lovers of truth.”

Courage also touches upon other emotions. Cicero points out that we need to deal with excessive desire (*cupiditas*), pain or grief (*aegritudo*), immoderate pleasure (*voluptas*), and anger (*iracundia*) with courage.

It is the virtue concerned with endurance and resilience in the face of fear. Once, a student asked Epictetus which words would help a person thrive, and he replied:

*“Two words should be committed to memory and obeyed by alternately exhorting and restraining ourselves, words that ensure we lead a mainly blameless and untroubled life: **persist** and **resist**.”*

Epictetus held that without persistence, we cannot endure hardships well, and may give in to sinful vices. And without self-control, we cannot resist the pleasures and give in to overindulgence.

[Marcus Aurelius](#) wrote of the virtue of courage,

“So remember this principle when something threatens to cause you pain: the thing itself was no misfortune at all; to endure it and prevail is great good fortune.”

And, courage is also about showing indifference to external situations. Like, being intrepid in the face of a death-threat.

Seneca says of this cardinal virtue:

"[Courage] is neither rash bravado nor thrill-seeking nor love of danger. Rather it is a knowledge of how to distinguish between what is bad and what is not. Courage is very careful of its own safety, yet it is also very well able to endure things whose bad appearance is false."

Seven Facts About Stoic Virtues

- 1. Origin of The Cardinal Virtues:** The four Stoic cardinal virtues—wisdom, temperance, justice, and courage—reflect the teachings of Socrates and Plato. They are closely related, but also distinct, and form the foundation of Stoic moral philosophy.
- 2. Pursuit of the Highest Good:** The ultimate aim in Stoicism is the attainment of the highest good, or *summum bonum*, which is a life of moral and ethical excellence.
- 3. Virtue as the Essence of Life:** Virtue is both essential and enough for *eudaimonia*, the Greek concept of human flourishing, making it the most significant characteristic of a Stoic's identity.
- 4. Moral Excellence as a Keystone:** Stoics believe that moral excellence in all situations is the key to effectively navigating all of life's challenges.
- 5. Virtue and Harmony:** By practicing the Stoic virtues, one can achieve harmony with society and resilience in the face of adversities.
- 6. Universal Access to Virtue:** Stoics hold that every person has the right and the capacity to pursue virtue and thereby practice the highest good.
- 7. Virtue as a Learnable Skill:** Virtue is a skill that can be learned and mastered, which can be used for living the best life possible.

How To Practice Stoic Virtues & Live An Excellent Life

Today, it's often hard to sustain happiness, but as Seneca said, *"Let our aim be a way of life not diametrically opposed to, but better than that of the mob."*

Here's how you can apply the Stoic virtues to modern living:

- 1. Recognize Virtue as Your Core Value:** Understand that virtue is the only true good in life. Make it the core differentiator in your life's decisions. Embracing moral excellence at all times will set a strong foundation for your actions and decisions.
- 2. Respond with Virtue:** Make a conscious effort to live virtuously. It's not enough to understand virtue; you must act on it consistently. In any situation—pain, adversity, temptation, or threat—ask yourself how you can use a virtue to navigate the challenge. As Ryan Holiday says, *"A Stoic believes they don't control the world around them, only how they respond—and that they must always respond with courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice."*
- 3. Question Your Actions:** Use your wisdom to pause before acting or reacting. Ask yourself, "Is this sensible?" "Is this fair?" "Am I maintaining self-control?" Ask, "What would Marcus Aurelius do in my situation?" Reflect if your actions are grounded in Stoic virtues. Remember Marcus Aurelius, *"If it's not right, do not do it. If it is not true, do not say it."*
- 4. Value Virtue Over Material Wealth:** Use your wisdom to avoid compromising your core values for material wealth. Remember Cicero's words: *"If you possess virtue, you lack nothing necessary for living well. Virtue alone can lead to happiness, honor, and love, regardless of your material possessions."*
- 5. Practice Temperance to Prepare for Adversity:** Occasionally practice strict moderation, as the wealthy Stoics used to do on certain days every year. Eat simply, dress plainly, and speak less. This practice (called [Premeditatio Malorum](#)) prepares your spirit for tough times and teaches you that what you once feared isn't so frightening after all.
- 6. Be Courageous To Remain Ethical:** It needs courage to do the right thing even when you're not being watched, when you know no one's going to hold you accountable, or when you can get away with it. A true Stoic does the right thing simply because it is the right thing, and their

default behavior is always doing what's ethical and virtuous.

7. Be Indifferent to External Things: Stoics categorize a thing as good (virtue), bad (vice), or indifferent (good indifferent or bad indifferent). A Stoic is indifferent to external things, like wealth, praise, pain, and expectations, and those things that fate dealt them out. As Ryan Holiday says, *"Think of that today, that it's not about apathy or even a lack of expectation. It's simply the quiet strength of not needing a preference, because you're that strong."*

Virtuous behavior is *indispensable* and *non-negotiable* in a Stoic's life. Here are some beautiful quotes on this:

The fundamental goal (of virtue ethics) is to live a life worth living, a eudaimonic existence, though what this means, precisely, varies from school to school. We achieve this goal by practicing a number of virtues, practical wisdom being the one that teaches us the crucial difference between what is and is not good for us, morally speaking. — [Massimo Pigliucci](#)

**A virtuous life is made up of
many independent virtuous acts.**

If we fail to act virtuously in one instance, we have the chance to do so in the next. Take each present moment to be important and focus on judging it accurately and acting virtuously in that moment.

#STOICISM



If, at some point in your life, you should come across anything better than justice, prudence, self-control, courage—than a mind satisfied that it has succeeded in enabling you to act rationally, and satisfied to accept what's beyond its control—if you find anything better than that, embrace it without reservations—it must be an extraordinary thing indeed—and enjoy it to the full.

But if nothing presents itself that's superior to the spirit that lives within—the one that has subordinated individual desires to itself, that discriminates among impressions, that has broken free of physical temptations, and subordinated itself to the gods, and looks out for human beings' welfare—if you find that there's nothing more important or valuable than that, then don't make room for anything but it.

– Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 3.6

Marcus Aurelius explains how to use Virtue to the best of our ability:

"They cannot admire you for intellect. Granted — but there are many other qualities of which you cannot say, 'but that is not the way I am made'. So display those virtues which are wholly in your own power — integrity, dignity, hard work, self-denial, contentment, frugality, kindness, independence, simplicity, discretion, magnanimity. Do you not see how many virtues you can already display without any excuse of lack of talent or aptitude? And yet you are still content to lag behind."

– Marcus Aurelius, (Meditations, 5.5)

How To Cultivate Each Stoic Virtue?

Stoics believe that being virtuous means living in harmony with reason and nature. To achieve this, they cultivate the four cardinal virtues in these ways:

Wisdom: Seek Truth and Learn Continuously: Cultivate wisdom by actively

seeking knowledge and understanding. Make sound judgments by learning from experiences and practicing introspection. This pursuit of truth will deepen your self-awareness and enhance your comprehension of the world.

Courage: Stand Resolute Amidst Adversity: Embrace courage not just as physical bravery but as mental and emotional resilience. Face life's challenges and fears with unwavering determination, using your rational understanding to guide you through tough times.

Justice: Act Ethically and Contribute Positively: Be just by treating others with fairness and respect. Recognize your role in society and the interconnectedness of all. Uphold moral values in your actions and strive to make a positive impact on your community.

Temperance: Balance Desires with Rational Restraint: Practice temperance by controlling impulses and desires. Find the middle ground between indulgence and restraint, and make decisions that reflect your true values. This balance will lead to rational choices that contribute to a well-ordered life.

To a Stoic, the moral sequence leading to happiness in life is this:

If you are virtuous, then you are good, and therefore you will be happy.

The Stoics strongly believed in *Sympatheia*—mutual interdependence and oneness among everything in the universe.

Constantly think of the universe as one living creature, embracing one being and soul; how all is absorbed into the one consciousness of this living creature; how it compasses all things with a single purpose, and how all things work together to cause all that comes to pass, and their wonderful web and texture.

– Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 4.40

What Are The 4 Main Ideas of Stoicism?

Stoicism is based on four main ideas that guide its teachings:

- 1. Rationality:** Stoics believe that rational thinking and logical reasoning are essential for a virtuous life. By using reason to understand the world and one's emotions, one can achieve inner peace and harmony.
- 2. Virtue:** Stoics argue that virtue is the highest good and the only thing truly valuable. They define virtue as living in accordance with reason and nature, with wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance as the 4 cardinal virtues.
- 3. Control:** Stoics distinguish between things that are within our control (our thoughts, actions, and reactions) and those that are not (external events, other people's actions). They teach that focusing on what we can control, and accepting what we cannot control, leads to a more fulfilling life.
- 4. Emotions:** Stoics maintain that negative emotions, such as anger, fear, and jealousy, stem from errors in judgment and misplaced values. By understanding the true nature of things and cultivating rationality, one can overcome these emotions and achieve tranquility, contentment, and resilience.

How Did The Stoic Virtues Originate?

The four cardinal Stoic virtues originate from the four Socratic virtues. [Zeno, the first Stoic](#), used Socratic, Aristotelian, and Platonic writings to name and classify the four cardinal virtues of Stoicism. These together, he declared, are necessary for *the highest good of a man*.

Socrates said wisdom is good because it is best if only human abilities are good, and not because wisdom is the only good thing. According to Aristotle, an action counts as virtuous when one chooses the action knowingly and for its own sake. In simple terms, it means virtue shows itself in action.

Aristotle was Plato's student, and it was Socrates who taught Plato. In a lighter vein, in [Anscombe's famous phrase](#), the Stoic virtues were "*conjured up by Aristotle*." Learning the Stoic virtues [trains one well at thinking](#)

[correctly](#) to always act justly and righteously. Stoicism's virtue-thinking also helps one avoid social and personal conflicts, such as disrespecting others or flaunting a bloated sense of entitlement.

Final Words

Anyone can be a Stoic and still enjoy life, wherever they are in life. Some of the most famous Stoics were slaves, senators, water bearers, and emperors who laughed, loved, and lived among us.

Remember Marcus Aurelius' "What injures the hive, injures the bee."

About Author/Editor

[Dr. Sandip Roy](#) is a medical doctor and psychology writer, with a focus on mental well-being, positive psychology, narcissism, and Stoicism. His warm-hearted expertise has helped many mental abuse survivors find happiness again. Co-author of '[Critique of Positive Psychology and Positive Interventions](#)'.